A Short History of Universal Reconciliation

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Chapter 1: Greek and Roman Christianity

Early Church leaders had differing views on nearly every subject. However, the majority of them believed in universal reconciliation for at least the first four centuries. Their views are not as important as Scripture itself, of course, but many have questioned this doctrine, saying, “If it is really a true teaching, then why are there not more Churches teaching it today?” This booklet answers that question. It shows how the teaching came to be discredited in the early fifth century because of religious-political infighting over issues that often had little to do with the teaching itself.

Until I was 23, I too had no idea that a view other than hell-fire for the lost even existed. Then I read the first page of a book advocating universal reconciliation and, horrified, I would not touch the book for another eight months. But the damage was done. Now I knew the view existed, and whenever I read the Bible again, I saw scores of passages teaching it. My eyes had been opened, and I could not get them shut again.

Yet for a time, I cringed every time I read about all things being put under His feet, defined in terms of "*things in heaven, things in earth, and things under the earth*." I winced every time I read, "*as in Adam all die, even so in Christ will all be made alive*." I was pained every time I read the comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5, where through one man all were condemned, and even so through One Man all men were given justification of life.

Finally, I picked up that book (now out of print) and read it in one evening. My life changed, and in the years that followed, I searched out every detail, every possible objection, and sought the balance between the biblical statements about divine judgment and how this fit with the ultimate restoration of all things.

If the Bible is so clear in its teaching of universal reconciliation, with Paul and John standing at the forefront of this teaching, then surely we ought to see it reflected in the writings of the early Church leaders who sat under their teaching and in later generations. And we certainly do. In fact, it was by far the most dominant view, especially in the Greek-speaking Churches of Asia where Paul ministered, as well as the Alexandrian Church in Egypt, where Thomas ministered before going to India.

In the first few decades, the gospel was more restricted in Rome than in other places. Though many did understand Greek, the dominant language was Latin, and it took longer for the Scriptures to be translated into Latin. Likewise, the Greeks and Romans had different interests. The Greeks, with all their classical statues attempting to depict virtue, beauty, and perfection, were in a search for the ideal—the perfect man. The Romans, on the other hand, had an empire to administer and control, so they were concerned primarily with the pursuit of law and order.

And so the Roman Christians (such as Lactantius, Tertullian, and Augustine) pictured Jesus as the God of Law and Order. Their concept of divine justice followed the Roman idea that to keep law and order and to deter crime or revolt, one had to increase the punishment to intolerable levels. Thus, as time passed, one could be executed for relatively small crimes. This happens when deterrence takes precedence over justice. The criminal is more quickly discarded through excessive punishment.

On the other hand, biblical law concerns itself with justice, built upon the basic principle that the severity of judgment is always directly proportional to the crime itself. Hence, if you steal $100, you owe your victim $200, no more and no less. The deterrence factor is always subservient to the establishment of justice, and the criminal is more easily restored through justice.

In biblical law, justice is not done until full restitution has been made to all the victims of injustice. In Roman law, "justice" is not done until the criminal has been punished and others deterred from committing the same type of crime. And so, for example, Tertullian, the Christian Roman lawyer, bitterly writes in 203 A.D.

> ***"How I shall admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many kings … groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness, so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer***

flames than they ever kindled against Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in raging fire."(de Spectaculis, 30)

In the same year (203 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria fled for his life during the persecution of the Roman Emperor, Severus, after being the head of the Church in Alexandria for 13 years. In *Stromata*, VII, 26 he writes:

"God does not wreak vengeance, for vengeance is to return evil for evil, and God punishes only with an eye to the good."

Again, in commenting upon **1 Tim. 4:9–11**, wherein we read that He is the Savior of all men, especially those that believe, Clement writes:

"And how is He Saviour and Lord, if not the Saviour and Lord of all? But He is the Savior of those who have believed … and the Lord of those who have not believed … for all things are arranged with a view to the salvation of the Universe by the Lord of the Universe, both generally and particularly … But necessary corrections, through the goodness of the great Overseeing Judge, both by the attendant angels, and through various preliminary judgments, or through the Great and Final Judgment, compel egregious sinners to repent."

Please excuse his lengthy sentences, typical of that day. Any sentence that has more than 15 words in it is today considered to be college-level writing. But it was normal back then. See also Paul's sentences, which can go on and on!

Clement also wrote in *Stromata*, VII, 6,

"We say that the fire purifies not the flesh but sinful souls, not an all-devouring vulgar fire, but the 'wise fire' as we call it, the fire that 'pierceth the soul' which passes through it."

Again, Clement wrote in *Ecl. Proph.*, XXV, 4,

"Fire is conceived of as a beneficent and strong power, destroying what is base, preserving what is good; therefore this fire is called 'wise' by the Prophets."

Where did Clement get this idea of the "wise fire" that purifies, rather than destroys? He certainly did not get it from the Egyptian culture surrounding him. According to Jaques de Goff's book, The Birth of Purgatory, pages 19 and 20,

"The Egyptian Hell was particularly impressive and highly refined … Confinement and imprisonment played an important role. The tortures were bloody, and punishment by fire was frequent and terrifying … When it came to the topography of Hell, the Egyptian imagination knew no limits …

Intermediate states of phases in the other-worldly process of purification did not exist."

Jaques de Goff also informs us on page 53 of the contrast between the Egyptian view of divine punishment and that of the early Christians,

"From the Old Testament, Clement and Origen took the notion that fire is a divine instrument, and from the New Testament the idea of baptism by fire (from the Gospels) and the idea of a purificatory trial after death (from Paul)."

Few Christians today realize that the Church's doctrine of a burning hell is much closer to the Egyptian view than to the view of the early Church. The fact that the Egyptians taught eternal torture in both hell and purgatory stands in direct opposition to the teaching of the Church in the first few centuries. Only later did the Church finally come to agree with the Egyptian religious teaching on the subject.

When Clement fled Alexandria in 203, his most brilliant student, Origen, replaced him as head of the Church in Alexandria. After Paul, Origen was the first great Theologian of the Church, and his writings were the most influential of his time. Though he did not originate the idea of universal reconciliation, he is today the most well-known Universalist of all time, simply because of the sheer volume of his writings and the extent of his influence. Hence, universal reconciliation is often called "Origenism."

Chapter 2: Origen of Alexandria

Origen of Alexandria was just seventeen when he became the head of the Church in Alexandria. The persecution of Emperor Severus began in 202 A.D., which caused Clement to flee to Antioch and which also saw Origen's father imprisoned and ultimately martyred. Origen himself would have exposed himself to the Roman authorities as well, had not his mother hidden his clothes so that he would not leave the house. Thus, she saved his life.

When his father was executed, the family estate was confiscated by the government, and the family was immediately reduced to poverty. But a wealthy lady in Alexandria took Origen into her house and provided for him so that he could preach the Word. But he insisted upon supporting himself, and so he soon opened a Grammar school.

A large number of non-Christians soon were sending their children to his school, also asking him to instruct them in religious subjects, and soon he had many converts to Christ. Seeing his potential, Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, then appointed him at the young age of 18 to head the great Catechetical School (their Bible College).

Origen took his duties very seriously. He insisted upon receiving only the smallest salary necessary to sustain life. He ate little and studied long into the night. In those days monkish austerity was held in high regard, and so he soon became well known for his sanctity. Certainly, not only was he a sincere believer, but he was an "enthusiast," a nice word for a fanatic for Christ.

His students were inspired by his fearlessness, and many of them were martyred by the Roman authorities. Origen went to the place of their executions to encourage them in the faith. But his excessive enthusiasm for Christ led him (about 206 A.D.) to emasculate himself, taking Jesus' words in **Matt. 19:12** a bit too literally. The bishop at first applauded him, but later condemned such an act—and rightfully so.

In 213 Origen visited Rome for a short time, and then went to Arabia at the invitation of some of the Bedouin tribes who requested Christian teaching. He returned to Alexandria in 216 about the time that the Roman Emperor massacred many of the citizens because some had jeered at him. Origen then moved to Caesarea in Palestine, where the bishops persuaded him to expound the scriptures publicly. However, they did not ordain him formally, and this became an issue to Demetrius, the bishop in Alexandria, who was, by now, becoming jealous of Origen's talent and popularity.

Demetrius wrote to Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem, as well as to Theocristus, bishop of Caesarea, complaining that they were allowing an unordained minister to teach the people. They wrote back that this practice had been sanctioned several times in the past. Demetrius was unsatisfied and sent a letter to Origen, ordering him to return at once to Alexandria. He complied humbly, and resumed his position as head of the School.

Then about five or six years later, Origen received a letter of invitation from Mammaea, the mother of Alexander, the Roman Emperor himself. She was living in Antioch, and invited him to come there to teach—and even sent a full military escort for him. There was little that bishop Demetrius could do about that! After his stay in Antioch, as he passed through Palestine, the bishops there ordained him as a Presbyter.

Demetrius resented the fact that these bishops, in effect, had bypassed him, and so he declared Origen to be unfit for the priesthood on the grounds that he was a self-made eunuch. His position was based upon the law of the Old Testament priesthood in **Lev. 21:20**. Here is evidence that even in the third century the Church's priesthood was already reverting back to the requirements of the Levitical priesthood instead of Melchizedek as established by Christ.

By this time Origen had written a number of books and commentaries, which were being spread throughout the Greek-speaking world, making him one of the most well-known Bible teachers of the day. Meanwhile, Demetrius made life difficult for him in spite of his humble submission, and so it was not long before he decided to retire to Palestine in 231, where he was warmly received by the bishops there.

Demetrius, however, assembled all the bishops of Egypt to condemn Origen, but the bishops only deprived him of his

office and teaching position at the School in Alexandria. Demetrius became still angrier and called for another council (232 A.D.), inviting only those bishops who agreed with him or could be manipulated. Thus, Demetrius succeeded in excommunicating Origen from the Church.

In the East, the bishops ignored this excommunication and freely welcomed Origen, but in the West, particularly in Rome, it was a different matter. The Roman mind was more interested in law and order than in justice, and to them, Origen was now a non-Christian rebel. It was not for any of Origen's teachings that he was condemned and excommunicated, but rather to satisfy the pride of a carnally-minded bishop who took offense at his fellow bishops in Palestine for honoring a man who had attained greater popularity than himself.

Bishop Demetrius died shortly after this, but the damage was done. The succeeding bishops of Alexandria respected the excommunication decree and did not attempt to reverse it. Meanwhile, Origen continued to write his commentaries in Palestine until a new Roman Emperor came to power named Maximin (235 A.D.). He began another round of persecution of Church leaders, causing Origen to go into hiding and later moving to Athens.

He continued to travel and teach at the invitation of various bishops, even corresponding with the first (secret) Christian Emperor, Philip, who ruled from 244–249. Philip was killed in battle by Decius, who then became the next emperor in 250. Perhaps because of this, Origen was arrested and tortured for some length of time with threats of being burned alive. Origen was true to his own principles and did not deny the faith. When Decius died in 251, his tormentors allowed him to "escape."

Origen died two years later in the city of Tyre (253 A.D.). Though he has become the most well-known Universalist of the early Church, this is only because he was the most prolific writer and the most influential theologian of his day. It should be stressed, however, that he did not have to convince any of the Greek-speaking bishops that God would save all mankind. This teaching was not even an issue, because they all assumed it was true. If it had been considered to be heresy, they would have rejected him and excommunicated him for teaching it.

I have gone into some detail about Origen's life, because a century and a half later, in 400 A.D., Origen would again become the center of controversy that brought the teachings of Universalism itself into disrepute. Once again, it had little or nothing to do with the teachings themselves; it had everything to do with personality disputes and a political struggle between bishops.

But all of this occurred after the Golden Age of Universalism in the fourth century, in which this teaching reached its zenith through Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyassa. In the introduction to the writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus ("Wonder Worker"), bishop of Caesarea in the third century, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VI, page 3 says,

> ***"Alexandria continues to be the head of Christian learning … We have already observed the continuity of the great Alexandrian school; how it arose, and how Pantaenus begat Clement, and Clement begat Origen. So Origen begat Gregory, and so the Lord has provided for the spiritual generation of the Church teachers, age after age, from the beginning. Truly, the Lord gave to Origen a holy seed, better than natural sons and daughters."***

Chapter 3: The Golden Age of Universalism

When Origen went to Caesarea in 231 A.D., there were two brothers from a rich family in Neocaesarea in Pontus who came to study under him for five years. They were Gregory (later called Thaumaturgus, "Wonder Worker") and his brother Athenodorus. Origen gave them a deep love for the Scriptures, and they were probably the first to introduce Origen's teachings to that northern province of what is now Turkey.

Gregory's *Panagyric on Origen* was written on the occasion of their parting. A Panagyric is a speech of lavish praise written for a festival or special day. According to Hosea Ballou's The Ancient History of Universalism, p. 130, written in 1829, Gregory "*was reckoned among the most eminent bishops of the time*."

Origen also had his critics, but the remarkable thing is that they never disputed his teaching on Universalism! Yet as the Church leaders became less Christian in their attitudes and more rigid and pompous in their show of religion, their passion for dispute began to reach the stage of frenzy. Hosea Ballou says on page 133,

> ***"In one word, so universal was the passion for censure, that scarcely an individual of eminence escaped reproof from one quarter or another."***

Ballou makes the point on page 147,

> ***"Throughout the long period of nearly a century and a half … there is not an intimation found that Origen's Universalism gave any offence in the church, notwithstanding his writings, the meanwhile, underwent the severest scrutiny, and were frequently attacked on other points … Even the few who treated his name with indignity, and bitterly censured various parts of his doctrine, uniformly passed, in silence, over the prominent tenet of Universal Salvation."***

Methodius, bishop of Tyre, is a good example, since Origen had died in his city and was no doubt buried there. Methodius attacked his teaching that in the resurrection the dead will rise not with physical bodies but as spiritual beings. He attacked Origen's teaching that the witch of Endor had actually raised Samuel himself. He attacked Origen's teaching that the saints in eternity would become angels and that all human souls were created at the beginning and thus pre-existed before being born on earth. Yet, as Ballou points out, "*in all his search for errors, Universalism escaped without a censure*" (p. 150).

Peter, a later bishop of Alexandria, castigated Origen for being a schismatic (causing division), solely because he finally left a domineering and carnally-minded bishop to live in Caesarea where he was well treated.

Meanwhile, Origen was greatly admired by the vast majority of Church leaders in the third and fourth centuries, including Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, who was by far the most learned of all Church leaders of his day. His Ecclesiastical History is the first of its kind after the book of Acts itself to record the history of the Church to the fourth century.

During the fourth century, some of the greatest men of the Church openly taught that all men would be saved, some by believing in Christ today, and others by means of judgments in an afterlife. Hosea Ballou states on page 166,

> ***"… that the doctrine of Universal Restoration was regarded, in the church, as neither heretical nor even unpopular; and that the standard of orthodoxy, so far as it concerned that particular point, was then supposed to require only a belief in future punishment."***

Hence, it can be seen that my own teaching on this subject would have been regarded as orthodox in the third and fourth centuries, though no doubt I would have been attacked on many other points—as everyone was. No one in those days taught that unbelievers would be saved apart from judgments called "fire."

Universalism today is often defined by the idea of salvation without judgment or accountability; but that is why I have made a distinction between Universalism and Restoration. My teaching on Restoration is close to the type of Universalism taught in the first centuries of the Church. The only difference is that the only "torment," permissible in the law is a maximum of forty stripes, whereas they tended to think of the "fire" in more literal terms. We agree, however, that the fire was temporary.

Novatian of Rome (about 250 A.D.) wrote in his De Regula Fidei, IV, that

> ***"… wrath and indignation of the Lord, so called, are not such passions as bear those names in man; but that they are operations of the Divine Mind directed solely to our purification."***

Here, then, is at least one Latin father who agreed with the Greek fathers of the Church.

Gregory of Nazianzen, bishop of Constantinople (325–390 A.D.), along with his good friend Basil, compiled a collection of Origen's writings called *Philokalia*, "Love of the Beautiful." Gregory was known as one of the four Eastern Doctors of the Church. Gregory wrote in Orat. XXXIX, 19 about the lake of fire:

> ***"These (apostates), if they will, may go our way, which indeed in Christ's; but if not, let them go their own way. In another place perhaps they shall be baptized with fire, that last baptism, which is not only very painful, but enduring also; which eats up, as it were hay, all defiled matter, and consumes all vanity and vice."***

Robert Payne writes of Gregory on page 179 of his book, The Fathers of the Eastern Church,

> ***"Of all the Fathers of the Church, he was the only one to be granted after his death the title 'Theologian,' which until this time was reserved for an apostle—John of Patmos."***

Gregory's friend, Basil (known as "the father of the monastic movement") had a brother who was also named Gregory, who became the bishop of Nyassa, a town in Cappadocia. After Origen, this Gregory has left us the greatest wealth of writings on Universal Restoration. In his commentary on **1 Cor. 15:28**, where all things are said to be put under His feet and God is to become "all in all," we read Gregory's comments:

> ***"So I begin by asking what is the truth that the divine apostle intends to convey in this passage? It is this. In due course evil will pass over into non-existence; it will disappear utterly from the realm of existence. Divine and uncompounded goodness will encompass within itself every rational creature; no single being created by God will fail to achieve the kingdom of God. The evil that is now present in everything will be consumed like a base metal melted by the purifying flame. Then everything which derives from God will be as it was in the beginning before it had ever received an admixture of evil."***

In commenting specifically upon the phrase that God will be "all in all," he says that "*obviously, God will be 'in all' only when no trace of evil is to be found in anything. For God cannot be in what is evil*."

Robert Payne's The Fathers of the Eastern Church, pp. 168, 169, says of this Gregory,

> ***"Of the three Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyassa is the one closest to us, the least proud, the most subtle, the one most committed to the magnificence of men. That strange, simple, happy, unhappy, intelligent, and God-tormented man was possessed by angels … In Eastern Christianity his Great Catechism follows immediately after Origen's First Principles. These were the two seminal works, close-woven, astonishingly lucid, final …Athanasius was the hammer, Basil the stern commander, Gregory of Nazianzus the tormented singer, and it was left to Gregory of Nyassa to be the man enchanted with Christ … Four hundred years after his death, at the Seventh General Council held in A.D. 787, the assembled princes of the Church granted him a title which exceeded in their eyes all the other titles granted to men; he was called 'Father of Fathers'."***

Chapter 4: The Rising Controversy

Though Origen was one of the most influential theologians of the third and fourth century, it is only natural that he also had enemies who opposed various things that he had taught. And, indeed, whenever someone takes it upon himself to expound on a wide variety of biblical topics, there will always be some who are offended by each new topic that is treated.

In the book, How to be a Bishop without Being Religious , Charles Merrill Smith gives advice to Christian ministers to refrain from teaching doctrines, because this will only divide the people into factions and continually split the Church. This advice has been followed by many, resulting in greater unity at the expense of the knowledge of Scripture. By contrast, my advice is to develop both the fruit of the Spirit as well as biblical knowledge, for this is the true path toward unity without sacrificing truth. Angry and vindictive men must always impose unity by force, regardless of how much they teach; while Christ-like men attain unity through love, kindness, and humility.

The fourth century came to a close, and the great Universalists of the day died and were resting in peace. Unfortunately, a great many Christian bishops had spent too little time cultivating the fruits of the Spirit and too much time accumulating money and power. During most of the fourth century, the Arian controversy about whether or not Christ was a created being, brought about the practice of holding Church Councils to decide truth and heresy by the reasoning of the carnal mind. The "heretics" were treated as badly as the Roman Emperors had treated Christians in the heyday of its persecutions.

The opinion of the great Gregory Nazianzen, bishop of Constantinople, called "The Theologian," is recorded on pages 178, 179 of Ballou's The Ancient History of Universalism ,

> ***"He condemned the captiousness of the zealous bigots upon doctrinal points … The clergy of that day, he boldly, and it appears justly, represented as a body of men avaricious, quarrelsome, licentious, and in one word, unprincipled; and of the frequent councils which then disturbed the peace of the church, he declared that he was afraid of them, because he had never seen the end of one that was happy and pleasant, or that did not rather increase than diminish the evil."***

This Gregory died in 390. The other Gregory, bishop of Nyassa (the brother of Basil), died in 394 or 395 near the age of sixty. Didymus the Blind, who had become blind at the age of five, yet rose to become the President of the great Catechetical School in Alexandria (which post Origen had also held a century earlier), also died in 395 near the age of ninety. Titus, bishop of Bostra had already died some time earlier.

There were new rising stars in the Church in those days. The learned, though bitterly vindictive Jerome, bishop of Bethlehem, was a great linguist and translator of letters and Scripture. John Crysostom, the orator bishop of Constantinople, lived until 407. And finally, in the West, Augustine converted to Christianity from Manicheanism in 388 and had soon been ordained bishop of Hippo, near Carthage in North Africa. He lived until 430.

With the expulsion of the Arians (the followers of Arius) in the fourth century, who had denied the Trinity, the Church now had the time to search out other heresies to conquer. Like the modern world wars, which start small and localized and then grow as each side gains supporters, the Universalist controversy started small as well in the year 391.

In that year Epiphanius, bishop of Cyprus, visited Jerusalem, where John was bishop. John was an admirer of Origen, but Epiphanius greatly opposed Origen's teaching. As a courtesy, John invited Epiphanius to address the Church in Jerusalem. Epiphanius, however, used the occasion to attack Origen and reproached John for allowing heresy in his midst. When this line of preaching continued, John sent his archdeacon in front of the whole church to request him to desist this attack. After the meeting, the heated discussions continued, centering mostly around Origen's belief that the resurrection was not bodily.

A couple of years later, Epiphanius again came to Jerusalem, but stayed at a monastery 20 miles to the West. At that

time, Jerome's brother, Paulinianus, arrived at Bethlehem on business. Epiphanius ordered him to be seized, bound and gagged, and then ordained him a deacon by force—a practice not without precedent in those days.

Seeing that Epiphanius was out of his jurisdiction, this was offensive to John, who angrily complained of this breach of protocol. Recall that this was the same complaint made by the Alexandrian bishop when the bishops of Caesarea had ordained Origen. John threatened to write letters of complaint to all the Churches, and this news reached the ears of Epiphanius, who by this time had returned to Cyprus.

Epiphanius retorted that John's complaint was not really about this breach of protocol, but about the Origenist dispute. In 394 he published the first censure on Universalism that we have on record. Ballou writes of this on page 215,

> ***"We have said that in this passage occurs the first censure which is to be found in all antiquity against the doctrine of Universalism. We must remark, however, that even here the censure falls, as the reader may perceive, not on the doctrine of the salvation of all mankind, but on that of the salvation of the devil."***

Epiphanius sent his letter not only to John but also to the other bishops in Palestine, which served to divide them into opposing camps. The most important result, perhaps, was that Jerome of Bethlehem sided with Epiphanius, even though up to that time he had clearly taught the salvation of all mankind in his Commentary on Ephesians and in other works. Jerome, however, wanted to support the ordination of his brother, Paulinianus, who had been ordained by Epiphanius (by force). So he withdrew from the communion of John of Jerusalem and, in fact, translated Epiphanius' letter into Latin to increase its circulation.

This, in turn, caused an open breach with Jerome's long-time friend and scholar, Rufinus, with whom he had studied the works of Origen under the tutelage of Gregory Nazianzen in Constantinople, as well as under Didymus the Blind in Alexandria. Thus, the Orgenist war widened.

It was not long before the news of the war reached Alexandria. Isidorus, the elderly patron of Origen there soon entered the scene of battle with an encouraging letter to his brethren in Palestine. He then carried letters from his archbishop, Theophilus, to both John and Jerome. Two months later, Theophilus, himself went to Palestine to lend his weight to the dispute and extend his influence in Palestine.

Isidorus discovered that his old friends in Bethlehem had turned against Origen, and so he sided with John of Jerusalem. Yet most of the Origenist disputes at this time centered around the theologian's views on pre-existence, the Trinity, the resurrection body, and the salvation of the devil and his angels.

Meanwhile, Rufinus and Jerome reconciled their differences, pledging themselves to refrain from attacks upon each other. Then Rufinus sailed for Rome, where he published a Latin translation of Origen's *Of Principles*. He also took it upon himself to change or leave out certain of Origen's statements that he knew would be offensive, claiming later that these passages were added or corrupted by heretics.

But he did not stop there. He alluded to an unnamed "accomplished brother" (i.e., Jerome) who had also greatly admired Origen, and pointed out his inconsistency in that he was now slandering Origen. Of course, Jerome could not resist replying to that, and soon the breach was worse than it ever was, two great scholars in a public feud, each pointing out the other's inconsistencies.

More than anything, this breach between Jerome and Rufinus widened the local controversy to a full-scale war within the Christian Church.

When Theophilus of Alexandria first became involved in the Origenist controversy, he took the side of John of Jerusalem. But Jerome sent him flattering letters and soon won his support for Epiphanius. As Hosea Ballou writes on page 226, "*But what no persuasion could effect, self-interest and revenge speedily accomplished.*"

Theophilus had already been involved in an internal dispute within the ranks of the Nitrian monks along the Nile River. The majority of them loved Origen, but the smaller group hated him, simply because he had opposed their doctrine that God possessed a body like that of a man. They were soon inflamed when Theophilus wrote a treatise agreeing with Origen that God was a spirit and did not possess a body. These "Anthropomorphites" (as they are called by the theologians) went to Alexandria with the intent of murdering Theophilus, but Theophilus tricked them into thinking that he had "seen the light" and was in agreement with them. He even promised to condemn the works of Origen. This satisfied them, and they went back to their desert dwellings.

Meanwhile, the elderly Isidorus, who was superintendent of the almshouse for the Alexandrian Church, refused to condone Theophilus' sudden change of doctrine. About that time, a wealthy widow donated a large sum of money to Isidorus—under the condition that Theophilus not be told about this donation. She wanted the money to be used to supply the needs of poor women, rather than be spent on Theophilus' other building projects.

Theophilus soon heard about it and flew into a rage. He banished Isidorus with false accusations. Isidorus went to find refuge among the Nitrian monks who were Origenists and who believed with him that God was a spirit (**John 4:24**). Theophilus then sent troops to invade the monks, burn their monasteries, and torture those who refused to deliver Isidorus into their hands. This caused great indignation and horror among the Christians in Alexandria, who greatly revered the monks as holy men. The admirers of Origen immediately fled the blood-thirsty bishop's jurisdiction, most of them going north to Scythopolis, about seventy miles north of Jerusalem.

Then, because Isidorus was a great admirer of Origen, Theophilus sided with Jerome and Epiphanius in that dispute, hastily called a Synod of his bishops, and issued the first official decree of its kind condemning Origen and all who approved of his works. This occurred in 399 A.D. Hosea Ballou writes on page 230,

> ***"Great were the mutual congratulations of Theophilus, Epiphanius, and Jerome, on these decisive measures. They informed each other, in their bombastic letters, that the snake of Origenism was now severed and disembowelled by the evangelical sword, that the host of Amalek was destroyed, and the banner of the cross erected on the altars of the Alexandrian church. Theophilus sent letters to Rome, to Cyprus, and to Constantinople, proclaiming his late measures, and exhorting the respective bishops to follow his example. Accordingly, Anastasius, the new Pope, who had succeeded Siricius at Rome, readily gratified the numerous partisans of Jerome in that city, by issuing a decree [400 A.D.] which was received through all the West, condemning the works of Origen; and Epiphanius soon afterwards convened a synod of his bishops in Cyprus, and procured from them a like sentence."***

What is perhaps most remarkable is that these decrees condemned Origen, not for his teaching on the salvation of all mankind, but for his other teachings, including, of course, his teaching that the devil would be saved in the end. There were many in the Church at that time who continued to preach the salvation of all mankind with no restraint from these anti-Origenist synods.

Even John of Jerusalem was cowed by Theophilus and discovered within himself a revelation that the other side was right after all. But in Constantinople, John Crysostom was a bishop who had both the integrity and the power to oppose Theophilus.

Eighty of the Nitrian monks escaped and made their way to Constantinople to appeal to John Chrysostom. John was horrified and reduced to tears when he saw them in their sad state and heard their story. Church historians have written entire books detailing this appalling chapter in Church history. Theophilus succeeded in deposing John Crysostom and

sending this elderly saint into exile, harassing him until his death in 407 A.D. The accusations against John were gleefully translated into Latin by Jerome who "*lost all feeling of decency and veracity*" (Hans von Campenhausen, The Fathers of the Latin Church, p. 178).

Yet because of these decrees, we are now supposed to believe that Universal Reconciliation is heresy. We are supposed to comply with the decrees of ungodly men in the Church by virtue of their position as bishops or archbishops, regardless of their personal character. I'm sorry, but I am not so respectful of ungodly men that I would allow them to interpret and establish the truth of Scripture. The prophets of the Old Testament suffered at the hands of the high priests in their day; and it was no different a few centuries into the New Testament era.

The Church bishops found it necessary to condemn Origen again in the Fifth General Council in 553 A.D., attended by only 148 bishops. Even so, nothing was specifically said about Origen's belief regarding the salvation of all men. It was left to the Emperor Justinian (527–565 A.D.) to condemn this belief in Anathema IX, where it read,

> ***"If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema."***

This seems to have been the first official decree on record condemning the restoration of all men, and it was done, not by the Church, but by a Roman Emperor participating in the Church Council. Ironically, the same Council praised Gregory of Nyassa, who believed that not only all men but also all the angels would be saved. Such is the inconsistent nature of the Church Council decrees.

Another Church Council in 692 again condemned Origen for his belief that the devil would be saved in the end. After this time, the Church entered a period of "dark ages" which historians describe as "The Golden Age of Profound Ignorance." The light of God's Word did not shine brightly again until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, which occurred largely because of the invention of the printing press, which brought the Scriptures to the common people. Likewise, through the efforts of translator, John Wycliffe, those Scriptures were brought to the common people *in their own language*.

In the present light of Scripture, coupled with some historical knowledge of how this great Restoration teaching was lost, we have opportunity to see truth that has been buried for many centuries by unscrupulous men in the early Church. In the year 2000, Pope John Paul II issued an inexplicit, yet formal, apology for the actions of some of its zealous followers in past centuries. May I suggest that the Church also apologize for the actions of Epiphanius, Jerome, and especially Theophilus of Alexandria?

Those of us who believe in universal reconciliation have much precedent in the teaching of the great early Church leaders. Their teachings were lost through the political struggles of unscrupulous, jealous, and bitter men who were bishops of the Church, but not true bishops in the eyes of God. The plain history is written by historians, if anyone will take the time to study Church history.

The history of the Church itself does not prove the teaching to be true. But it does show us how this teaching was lost and why the majority of Church theologians in later years taught the alternative doctrines of a torturous and eternal hell for the vast majority of mankind. For this reason, this short Church history is helpful, for it puts the teaching of universal reconciliation into its proper context.